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## 'An Unusual Freedom'?: Mbulelo Mzamane's *Mzala*.

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Mzamane's comments over the years seem to reflect a doubt or ambivalence over the status of his first collection of stories, *Mzala* (1980).<sup>1</sup> In his introduction Mzamane describes himself as 'a teacher first, an aspiring literary critic next and only very incidentally a writer' (viii). In an interview in 1983 in the Nigerian journal *Okella*, he repeats this, and adds, 'I do not consider myself very seriously as a writer' (39).<sup>2</sup> However, in the same interview he also defends himself against the criticism that his stories are 'escapist' or 'trivialize life'; people have tended to see him, he says, as 'a writer who is not very serious' (40). In 1979 Mzamane was in fact joint winner of the Mofolo/Piomer Prize for these stories, and Ravan's decision to republish *Mzala* in 1995 as part of the Ravan Writers Series indicates a continuing interest in the collection. This paper looks at Mzamane as a writer, and at *Mzala* in particular, in an attempt to assess the claims that have been made for this collection. It deserves recognition as an important contribution to the tradition of black South African writing in English. At the same time, it is necessary to look critically at the apparent endorsement of values and attitudes which may seem to contradict the author's stated commitment to a 'culture of liberation'. The stories have received little serious critical attention, and this is also an attempt to redress the balance.<sup>3</sup>

If one looks at Mzamane's critical writings dating from the 1970s, something of a paradox emerges: he presents a view of black South African writing as strongly politicized, as a 'committed literature'. In *New Classic* in 1978 he makes the familiar assertion that 'Art and politics in South Africa have become inseparable for the simple reason that politics pervades all aspects of a black man's existence' (1978:42). Writing in *Donga* in 1977 he states that 'the only relevant literature in an African context is a committed literature.... We turn to the short story and shout our message loudly and clearly.... We protest in categorical and unambiguous terms' (1977a:8). Yet if one turns to his first collection of stories one finds little evidence of any 'message' being shouted. The stories seem to be characterized by the *avoidance* of any explicit protest or any obvious attempt to conscientize. These are, at first sight, among the least 'political' of South African black writings of the 70s. It was, in fact, this quality that appealed to some of the early reviewers. For Lionel Abrahams, 'the writing manifests an unusual freedom: to treat of individuals as individuals, to laugh in sheer amusement, to let protest... take a back seat'.<sup>4</sup> He also comments on the author's 'distinct gift for starting characters visibly into life', and on his 'flair for dramatic situations' (1981:8). This may owe

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<sup>1</sup> *Mzala* was published internationally as *My Cousin Comes to Jo'burg and Other Stories* in 1981. All page references are to the South African edition, published by Ravan Press.

<sup>2</sup> The interview is republished in *Staffrider* 6(1) (1984): 39-41.

<sup>3</sup> See Ursula Barnett's *A Vision of Order* (1983:208-209), and Martin Trump's 'Black South African Short Fiction in English since 1976' (1988). There is also a commentary by Lauretta Ngcobo in a paper entitled 'Images of Women in Black South African Literature' (1990). The only extended study is an unpublished MA thesis by Venugopal Naidoo entitled 'Constructing a Black Identity: The Criticism and Fiction of Mbulelo V. Mzamane' (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Abrahams was reviewing *Mzala* in the *Rand Daily Mail* on 2 February 1981.

something to the fact that, according to Mzamane, his characters-and Mzala in particular-are drawn directly from life: 'In a few cases I've hardly bothered to disguise their names for fear I should lose their essence.... Mzala, who is my own cousin and was ignominiously repatriated to the Transkei for the umpteenth time only the other day, is a real person' (1980:xi). [t seems reasonable to suggest that the vitality and immediacy of the writing springs at least in part from this close relation to real-life prototypes and situations. The anecdotal flavour and informal narrative style are consistent with a community that relies largely on the oral exchange of information, news and gossip. Throughout the collection, one has the feeling that Mzamane is tapping into the rich oral culture of the township, with its fund of stories, anecdotes and proverbial wisdom.

The opening story, 'My Cousin Comes to Jo'burg', is an example of the strengths of this kind of writing. Mzal'u Jola, who comes from Tsolo in the Transkei, 'has the stature of an adult gorilla and walks with his arms flung out and his hands curving in, like a cowboy ready to draw' (3). Although he has been in the city for some years, there was a time when he was 'as green and raw as a cabbage' (3). The story consists of a series of anecdotes relayed by Sabelo, the narrator. We see Jola, i.e. Mzala ('cousin'), being ridiculed by the children who 'rank' (like taxis) outside the shop where he goes to buy cool drink for the first time. Even his choice of cool drink (raspberry) sends them into peals of laughter: 'red and green are favourites of country folk where people of the city buy Fanta or Coke' (4). So unfamiliar is he with crime that when his uncle's car is stolen he asks, 'But couldn't they approach you decently and borrow the car if they needed it that badly?' (5). When the narrator and his brother take him to see a movie (it turns out to be *Street with No Name*, starring Richard Widmark, a favourite with township audiences in the 50s), he embarrasses them by switching on the transistor radio he carries everywhere at a crucial moment-provoking 'an uproar of hisses, catcalls and invective from the audience'. When the narrator snatches it from him, he explains, 'I was going to insert the thing of the ear' (6). The story traces Mzala's evolution from 'that Xhosa mampara [fool]' (8) to a streetwise survivor. He is introduced to Jikida, 'a sly man who could make his way out of a hungry crocodile's mouth with ease' (8), and is befriended by the police sergeant, Mawulawula, who commands a 'gang' of constables. Soon, through his contacts at Crown Mines, he is able to find work, first as a cleaner, then as a cook. He qualifies for a pass, which, far from restricting him, gives him a sense of space: 'He refused to be confined to any one job, so that in his many years in the city he's worked as a doctor, a painter, a priest and a prophet' (12). Efforts to arrest and deport him are in vain---he always returns. In the end everyone says of him, 'Uvulekile manje', or 'He's as wide-awake as an owl' (13). [n fact, 'he's lived so long under the shadow of the vagrancy laws, the Influx Control regulations and the rest that he has come to consider such hazards as a shield and an umbrella.... He lives, as township folk never fail to point out, by "*Nkosi Sikelela*"' (13).

Mzal'u Jola is in fact a survivor *par excellence*. From being a *moegoe*, a figure of fun and ridicule, he becomes adept at survival in the city--so much so that he is able to exploit the credulity of others in a variety of guises or occupations. In this way (as Trump points out [1988:49]), the Mzala stories reverse the stereotypical Jim-comes-to-Jtl burg situation, and demonstrate the ability of ordinary people to adapt and even thrive in the city. No longer an obvious 'type' (the simple 'Jim'), Mzal'u Jola comes to stand for qualities which Mzamane

clearly admires-the resilience, resourcefulness and staying power which enabled people resist the worst that the apartheid regime could do to them. This point is made explicit in the author's introduction where he calls Jola 'a folk-figure, a sort of indestructible Proteus spr from the people' (1980:xi). In the stories it emerges through his vivid depiction of one person's capacity to turn any situation to his own advantage, and defy not only the restrictions imposed by the myriad of apartheid laws and regulations, but also the strictures of the narrator's parents. The narrator's father is a minister and his mother a staff nurse (as were Mzamane's own parents); as pillars of middle-class respectability, they view the comings and goings of Mzala, his 'indiscriminate womanising' (14), his conspicuous consumption of alcohol, and his dubious acquaintances with a very jaundiced eye. In one story the father actually drives one of Mzala's 'pick-ups' out of his house with a sjambok in the early hours of the morning. The narrator maintains a rather precarious balance, his allegiance divided between sympathy (or even admiration) for his cousin and loyalty to his parents and their standards. The key value is survival. Jola and Mawulawula regard themselves as both 'men of the world'; Jola's maxim seems to be 'We must live, dear neph' (38)-perhaps a conscious echo on Mzamane's part of the title story of Mphahlele's first collection, *Man Must Live*.<sup>5</sup> The keynote is one of appreciation for the zest for life displayed by Jola, the narrator's 'other cousin'. Sitha, and the gallery of friends, relatives, conspirators and rogues who make their appearance in the stories that follow. A striking feature of the collection, then, is the *absence* of any overt element of 'protest'. There are no examples of the stereotypical or 'spectacular' incidents of violence or racism that characterize some black writing. Nor is there any emphasis on the deprivation and poverty of the ghetto, its lack of facilities, its overcrowding, its squalor. The constant struggle of ordinary people to make ends meet and sustain some kind of family life is not what is foregrounded (compare, in this respect, Mphahlele's early short fiction, in particular his 'Lesane' stories<sup>6</sup>). If there is a tendency in 'protest' writing to portray people as victims, here they are seen as people with vitality and resilience who simply get on with life.

The continuity between Mzamane and the writers of the 50s needs to be emphasized. Mzamane acknowledges his debt to Writers like Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi, Dugmore Boetie and the District Six writers (and also to Herman Charles Bosman), and dedicates one of the stories in *Mzala* ('Dube 'train Revisited') to Can Themba.<sup>7</sup> If one compares Mzamane to other black writers of his generation, one striking difference is in fact his sense of an unbroken tradition stemming from Peter Abrahams and the writers of the 1950s. This is in part a result of his relatively privileged family circumstances and his secondary schooling in Swaziland, where he met the children of South African exiles and had access to the literature that was at that time banned in South Africa. He was in fact fortunate to receive extra-curricular tuition from Can Themba, then in exile in Swaziland. These

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<sup>5</sup> This suggestion is also made by Barnett (1983:208).

<sup>6</sup> The 'Lesane' stories were originally published in *Drum Magazine* in the 1950s; they have been republished in *The Drum Decade* (1989), edited by Michael Chapman.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mzamane's comments in the introduction to *Mzala*, 'I Remember' (vii-x), in his 'Introduction' to *Hungry Flames* (1986:ix-xvi), and in 'The 50s and Beyond: An Evaluation', where he states, 'I've repeatedly discovered influences of Mphahlele, Themba, Motsisi and others in my own work' (1977:1:27-28).

personal and literary contacts meant that he did not, as it were, have to start from scratch, and that it was to the short story form that he naturally turned.<sup>8</sup> He recalls how he and his friends used to try and outdo each other with 'Motsisms' in their writing, and he describes the impact on him of *The Classic* and writers like Motsisi and Motjuwadi (1980:x). The influence of the *Drum* style-characterized by Mphahlele as 'racy, agitated, impressionistic'(1980:7)-is obvious. When the narrator tells us that Jola's trousers were 'doing the jitterbug' (11), or when he reports that his heart 'thumped like the piston of an unruly engine' (17), one is reminded of Modisane: '[The magistrat 's] blue eyes are shining with a brilliance that sets my heart pounding like the bass of a boogie woogie' (1989:10).

More significant, perhaps, than these stylistic flourishes is the ability to capture the particular idiom and flavour of township talk: 'S'bali used to check on Sitha, as they say in the streets' (53). 'He has been wary of closing-in women, as they say, ever since' (27). 'She's my stop station, as they say' (85). The pressure of the language of the streets is evident throughout the stories, and is further evidence of Mzamane's debt to a writer like Mphahlele.<sup>9</sup> Lexical items which are unique to the dialect of the township are common: the narrator's brother Soso is 'a clever' who regards his cousin's suitor, S'bali, as a 'moomish' (54). 'Jack, ons moet gazaat', (we must pool our resources), says Yster to no one in particular as he emerges nursing a hangover in 'The Soweto Bride' (138). Where Mzamane exceeds most of his predecessors is in his willingness to capture in his dialogue the hybrid language of the ghetto, with its frequent code-switching from the indigenous language to *tsotsitaal*,<sup>10</sup> to something like standard English or Afrikaans, often within the same utterance. One example must suffice. On the bus on the way back from work Mazibuko informs the narrator that he has a leather jacket for his wife wrapped up on his lap-just such a jacket as the narrator has promised to buy his wife for her birthday.

*'Hawu! Jy's nie curious nie?' he asks and leans closer. 'Ek sal jou een ding vertel. Ngizokutshayela ngoba ngiyabona ukuthi awukeni. Jy ken nix. Jy word 'n moomish. Babhedgile* (sic), your wife and mine to see who gets a leather jacket first.'<sup>11</sup>

(88)

It is at this point in the story that the scales fall from the narrator's eyes, as it were. The point, though, is that the impact of Mzamane's stories is heightened immeasurably by this ability to capture the mixed speech modes of the township. Furthermore, as Trump points out,

<sup>1</sup> According to Mzamane, 'The majority of the writers of the Black Consciousness era began from a near-vacuum' (1989:36). He goes on to quote Serote's comments to an African Literature Association conference in Austin, Texas in March 1975: 'When I started writing, it was as if there had never been writers before in my country' (37).

<sup>9</sup> In his introduction to *Hungry Flames* he quotes Mphahlele on the question of the writer's use of English: 'The African writer listens to the speech of his people, to the ring of dialogue in his home language, and struggles to find an approximation of the English equivalent' (1986:xiii). This very much reflects the style of *Mzala*, with its frequent use of what Mzamane calls 'transliteration'.

<sup>10</sup> Literally; the language spoken by urban gangsters or delinquents (*tsotsis*); it originated in the townships and shanty towns around Johannesburg in the 1940s and 1950s; versions of it are spoken in townships throughout South Africa.

<sup>11</sup> A rough translation of the italicized sections would be: *Aren't you curious? Let me tell you one thing. I will tell you because I can see that you know nothing. You know nothing. You are being made a fool of. They have taken a bet .... I am grateful to my colleague, Mhlobo Jadezwani, of the Department of African Languages at Stellenbosch University, for his assistance.*

'This use of township patois establishes the writers' kinship with all levels of their community. Although most of the writers are professional people, they describe and in many cases celebrate the vibrancy of this commonly used township speech' (1988:48).<sup>12</sup> In his foregrounding (and implicit valorizing) of township speech, lifestyles and culture, Mzamane is building on the foundations laid by the *Drum* writers. And, like them, he is writing primarily for an audience of township 'insiders'. Tlisc stories, then, are characterized by their rich verbal texture, by their often anecdotal flavour and structure, by their frequent reference to a base of township lore and practice, and of course by the humour which pervades them. Humour-the ability to laugh at what is inherently absurd or ridiculous or incongruous-is itself an invaluable resource, another indicator of the resilience and adaptability of ordinary people.<sup>13</sup>

When one turns to the stories that constitute Part Two of the collection, however, some awkward questions arise. These stories focus on the attitudes, values and lifestyle of the aspirant black *petite bourgeoisie*. In 'A Present for my Wife', the neighbour's wife, Meisie, has got 'all the comforts you'd think a woman needs. Bedroom suite, kitchen scheme and now a fridge. She's by far the best dressed woman in our street, the first to wear an Afro wig and all that' (79-80). The story centres on the narrator's attempts to satisfy his wife's demands for material goods-in an attempt to keep up with the Joneses (or in this case the Mazibukos). His acquisition of a fridge makes it possible for his wife to start a rather exclusive shebeen catering for the township elite, but this in turn only leads to increased demands-in particular, for a leather jacket which the narrator promises to buy her for her birthday. The complex deception which he devises to satisfy his wife supplies the main narrative interest. The narrator (like Mzala) is someone who lives by his wits, and one can admire the ingenuity with which he wriggles out of tight corners. In this respect he (like Mzala) can be seen as a distant descendent of the trickster figure of traditional African folklore.<sup>14</sup> His exploits demonstrate his capacity to survive and even thrive. There are, however, significant differences: the narrator here is middle class, sophisticated, has a white-collar job, and is apparently secure in his tenure of a township house. What he is up against are not so much the restrictions or injustices

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<sup>12</sup> One should add that the use of *tsotsitaal*, with its deliberate subversion of linguistic norms and purity, also asserts a collective township identity and presence. According to the narrator of Mzamane's 'My Schooldays in Soweto' (from *The Children of Soweto*) most students resented being taught Afrikaans and 'preferred to communicate in our street dialect, called *tsotsi-taal*, the *lingua franca* of black youth in South Africa' (1982:6). In 'Black Writing and the South African Liberation Movement', Trump suggests that black writers have adapted English to their own purposes 'as part of their articulation or a counter-hegemonic discourse' (1990:170). He adds that the adoption of black speech patterns and dialects 'bears witness to the kinds of identification many of the writers wish to establish with the working class' (171).

<sup>13</sup> An overlooked influence is that of Herman Charles Bosman. Mzamane describes how he 'kept a dilapidated copy of Bosman's *Mafeking Road* to which [he] returned again and again' (1980:ix). One critic to pick up and develop the influence of Bosman is Naidoo (1992:54).

<sup>14</sup> Mzamane is obviously well aware of the continuing influence of oral forms and traditions on the modern South African writer. This is the subject of his chapter in *Literature and Society in South Africa*, 'The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature' (1984c:147-160). In his introduction to *Hungry Flames* he comments on the way Modisane's narrator in 'The Dignity of Begging' embodies 'the *chakijane* or *nimutlanyane* (Brer' Rabbit) motif found in traditional Southern African folktales' (1986:xiv). He adds, 'The story is about the tactics of survival in which *chakijane* excels' (xv). The stories in *Mzala* clearly illustrate the continuing influence of this particular element from orature.

of the apartheid system as the demands of his 'nagging' wife. The narrator's opening question-'What do you do with a nagging wife?' (77)-sets the tone and establishes a rapport with the reader on the basis of an assumed commonality of values. His tone is, typically, one of injured reasonableness:

She knows very well that I barely earn enough to enable us to rise above *pap* (porridge) and *morogo* [greens]. Yet she expects me to buy expensive presents of leather jackets, mink coats and evening dresses-which she'll never wear, anyway, since we can't afford to attend balls and shows.

(77)

He comes across as a thoroughly engaging fellow whose various stratagems are justified by the need to placate his wife while also seeing to his own comforts and needs. To this end he resorts to stealing money from his wife's purse, doctoring his pay-packet, siphoning off part of the earnings from the shebeen, and lying fluently whenever, as he puts it, 'survival demands it' (85). {Again, 'survival' is the key value.} His 'shyness' with women is presented as a problem to be overcome: when he finally manages to acquire a girlfriend ('a tea girl at the firm.... an ebony beauty with milk-white teeth and glossy thighs' [86]), he is simply following the example of 'other fellows who have dinyatsi [girlfriends] to whom they can escape' (78)! Throughout, his attitude to his wife is condescending, defensive and self-justifying. He maintains a steady flow of disparaging remarks, often focusing on her rather ample proportions. He steals from her, lies to her, and systematically deceives her-all without any sign of scruple or remorse. His attitudes are, in fact, thoroughly sexist, and quite incompatible with any real respect for her as a person or an equal. Women are either wives (demanding and unreasonable, to be placated) or girlfriends (objects of sexual desire, to be courted, indulged and pampered). What the story represents, then, is a masculinist culture in which male solidarity and marital infidelity are apparently the norm.

The reader finds himself (or, even more problematically, herself) in a position where it is difficult not to feel compromised. The strategy of the narrator is simply to assume approval on the part of the reader (who is, by implication, male). Should we allow ourselves to be entertained and amused by the narrator's wit and guile, or should we censure what any gender-sensitive reader would regard as very inappropriate conduct? I can find no evidence from within the story to suggest that the implied author's norms may be at variance with those of the narrator. The narrator is not exposed to irony, and no other perspective is supplied as a possible corrective. If there is to be a corrective, it is left to the reader to supply it. Our dilemma as readers is that we cannot both criticize the narrator and at the same time applaud his wit and ingenuity. Nor is this problem resolved by turning to other stories in Part Two of the collection.

'The Soweto Bride'-in some ways a richer, more interesting story - is built around the reception given to Solomzi, who returns from the United States with an American wife, Nanna. Solomzi is resplendent in his 'white *Arrow* shirt, black pleatless *Mayfair* slacks, black cardigan and a pair of *Florsheim* shoes...'. He sports an Afro and looks 'more American' than any of the 'distinguished American visitors who have graced the streets of Soweto in recent years' (126). In the story, America stands for whatever is smart, elegant, modern,

sophisticated-whatever (by implication) any upwardly mobile young Sowetan might aspire to.<sup>15</sup> Norma, who is plainly dressed, disappoints from the first: 'I had seen prettier and better dressed girls from the townships' (126). When she opens her mouth she disappoints even more. In conversation she is unresponsive, unenthusiastic about the planned welcome-back party, and-what is worse-she talks back: 'Do you usually treat adults like kindergarten kids?' she asks (127). The narrator begins to question whether she is what he calls 'the assimilable type' (128). He leaves no room for doubt as to his position:

I wondered whether you could safely give this one a black eye if she 'did nonsense'. She seemed the type who would lay a charge with the police against her husband. Give me my township type any time, I thought, as my mind automatically shifted to Kedibone, a staff nurse double-qualified, general and midwifery, but one who'd never double-negative any suggestion I made.

(128)

One could hardly find a more explicit example of male sexism, but it is one that seems entirely in keeping with the masculinist culture represented in these stories. When it comes to women, the narrator thinks only in stereotypes, and Norma is guilty of flouting the first requirement of any woman, which is submissiveness. Later in the story, Phambili (the narrator) admires Solomzi's firmness in 'handling' Norma, and guesses from her expression that Solomzi was showing her 'just where women got off in Africa' (137). When they finally leave, the narrator comments: 'He was dragging her off to bed to give her, I hoped, a taste of African manhood' (137). It comes as little surprise to discover that before the evening is out the narrator has apparently administered a mild beating to Kedibone. The need to assert and maintain male domination is taken as a given. In Solomzi's case, it is very definitely Norma who has the upper hand. He has to spend his leisure time socializing in town with Norma's friends, and sees Jess and less of his township pals. 'Jack, *daardie cherrie druk Sof, mel hom billy* [that girl has Sol by the cock]', remarks Yster succinctly (142).

Does the (implied) author actually endorse the sentiments and behaviour represented in such stories? Are these attitudes satirized or subverted in any way? It is true that in 'The Soweto Bride' the superficial parroting of slogans popularized by the American Black Power movement ('Soul Sister', 'Black is Beautiful') is undercut by what the story itself seems to demonstrate: far from acculturating in Soweto, Norma spends as little time there possible. She resists assimilation, and when the unfortunate Solomzi is killed in a car accident she returns to America, where she gives birth to his child. All the in-laws receive after her departure is one postcard. While the story may satirize their uncritical imitation of black American slogans and fashions, it seems to endorse Aunt Bessie's verdict on Norma: 'And to

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<sup>11</sup> The fascination of black South Africans with America and things American is, of course, not new. Anthony Sampson, who had just taken over as editor of *Drum*, recalls being told by a man at the Bantu Men's Social Centre, 'Tribal music! Tribal history! Chiefs! We don't care about chiefs! Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke Ellington, Satchmo and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American' (1956:20). 'The Soweto Bride' presents us with an updated, 70s version of this same fascination, which it partly satirizes. The extent of the American influence in the 50s is the subject of the first chapter of Rob Nixon's *Homelands. Harlem and Hollywood* (1994), and has also been documented by other writers.

imagine that we once thought she was as human as you and me!' (144). We are not encouraged to question the ethos of the culture into which she was expected to assimilate, and she herself is allowed no space in which to express her feelings or articulate her own point of view.

'The Soweto Bride' docs suggest that what the narrator refers to as 'our culture' is in fact a hybrid culture in which different elements sometimes coexist rather uneasily together. The more traditional elements are in evidence at the ceremony held at the parents' home to welcome the married couple back. When they arrive in a new black Cadillac convertible, ululating relatives burst out of the house and shower them with confetti made from discarded fahfee exercise books. Phambili is allowed inside, while the others sit outside in the tent where women have begun singing traditional wedding songs. Women enter to shake hands and enquire after the bride's health. When Phambili hints that the bride does not speak Xhosa, they switch "to Sesotho! Meanwhile the-mother has been weeping 'tears of gratitude' at the discovery that the makoti (daughter-in-law), Norma, is in fact black like them! When a woman dressed in the uniform of the Methodist Mothers' *umanyano* (union) bursts into an impromptu hymn, the whole house joins in. The narrator's response is instructive: 'Torn between self-respect and my instinctive response, I hummed the baritone part as audibly as I could but with my mouth firmly shut to create the illusion that I was silent' (130-131). He negotiates the cultural conflict he finds himself in by both participating (through his humming) *and* maintaining the distance and decorum which as a 'situation' (an educated, 'superior' person) he feels he must maintain. "What will the American think of us?" I kept on saying to myself (131). Embarrassed by the endless 'speechifying', he excuses himself and retires early. Far from invoking, in any simple, essentialist sense, 'African' or 'black' cultural values, this richly comic episode dramatizes the tensions which exist within the black community, and in particular between its more educated, upwardly mobile members and ordinary working-class people. Throughout the party that evening Phambili is anxious to demonstrate that, like Solomzi, he is a man 'of good breeding and education' (133). When it is his turn to speak as Master of Ceremonies, he invites the guests to 'partake of the waters of immortality and the other delicacies set before them' (133). At moments like this it does seem likely that the narrator's conduct is being gently satirized. The mode of writing invites comparison to a text like Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, which also deals with members of an emerging elite caught in a situation of cultural conflict. In fact at one point Kedibone quotes from Achebe's novel, which almost functions as a kind of intertext. But while the satirical element in Achebe's writing is unmistakable, Mzamane's intention is less clear.

Such criticism as there is of *Mzala* reveals divergent responses. In her reading of the stories, Ursula Barnett describes 'the young man who sees himself as a man of the world' as 'one of Mzamane's favourite objects of fun' (1983:209). According to Venugopaul Naidoo, however, 'we are encouraged to admire his wit, his resilience, his charming male cunning' (1992:59). He also finds that 'the virile masculinity represented by Jola is not subjected to any qualifying commentary or even irony' (51). Lauretta Ngcobo criticizes Mzamane for what she regards as his demeaning representation of women, but does not explore the attitudes and



assumptions that are embodied in and articulated by the narrators of the stories.<sup>16</sup>

Mzamane's own more recent critical writings certainly articulate a progressive position with regard to gender issues. He begins a paper entitled 'Gender Politics and the Unfolding Culture of Liberation in South Africa' by noting that 'sexism is deeply embedded in our patriarchal society' (1992:1), and continues: 'Sexism needs to be confronted...wherever it is encountered, at every layer of society, by both men and women' (6). While these remarks may be exemplary, they do not, of course, assist us in interpreting the stories in question. In his earlier critical writing Mzamane is silent on gender issues. Sexism is clearly 'deeply embedded' in the culture which is represented in *Mzala*, but the stories do not seem designed to critique this. Figures like Mzala, Phambili, Solomzi, Yster, and Samoosa exemplify the sexist and pleasure-directed behaviour of a male-centred and dominated society. In addition, there is little evidence of any questioning of the values of a consumerist and status-seeking aspirant middle class which bases itself on Western or American models. Excessive drinking is also a central ingredient of the masculinist culture of these stories: 'Beer and spirits flowed like ndambula [a form of township music] at the municipal beer hall, until blackout had claimed a considerable portion of our company, including myself' (138). Yster, whom we are invited to admire in the introduction as one of the 'heroes of continuance' (xi), is described (in 'The Soweto Bride') as 'an irrepressible gatecrasher with a radar for liquor', who intones endlessly, '*Ons het ge-groove*, Jack [we grooved, Jack]' (132). Is he in fact anything more than a party animal? It is perhaps salutary to recall that beerhalls and shebeens were among the first targets of students during the 1976 Soweto uprising.

Some critics have been led to take a simplistic view of *Mzala*, based on the supposed influence of Black Consciousness on Mzamane and his writing. According to Trump,

Mzamane's stories form part of that central stream of works by black writers which sets out to extol values in the black community rather than castigate this community for some of its weaknesses. There is no doubt that M7llmane's commitment at the time of writing these stories to the Black Consciousness movement informs this vision....

(1988:52)

Naidoo seems to agree: 'The sustaining of a collective black consciousness is the primary topos that informs *Mzala*' (1992:44)<sup>17</sup>. These judgments hardly seem to accord with the evidence of the stories. Far from endorsing 'black' cultural values or asserting a collective black identity, these stories in fact reveal the fractures and tensions within the black community-in particular differences based on class, gender, ethnicity and the rural/urban divide. There is a very obvious difference between Mzamane's stories and those of a writer like Matshoba, whose short story collection, *Call Me Not a Man*, was published in 1979, a

<sup>16</sup> According to Ngcobo, as she worked on the paper (which also dealt with Mphahlele and Ndebele), '[her] eyes open<'. wide al)d !she] was horrified.' She continues: 'Then I thought, how can I attack these writers, Mzamane in particular like him so much-he's another gentle person' (1992:95).

<sup>17</sup> Significantly, by the end of his chapter, Naidoo can no longer suppress his doubts: he accepts that a story like 'TI-Soweto Bride' reveals that in the urban environment 'an African culture does not exist in an unproblematic, coherent-way' (1992:61), and concludes by asking whether Mzamane 'as an educated intellectual' can fulfil 'any but the mos

year before *Mzala*, and immediately banned. Matshoba's stories have a very clear politicizing and conscientizing function, and are obviously informed by an ideological commitment to Black Consciousness. The same cannot be said of the stories in *Mzala*. This is not to say, of course, that Mzamane was not influenced by Black Consciousness or by the upsurge of black political resistance in the 1970s. The Soweto uprising of 1976 represented a watershed in the political history of the country, and in Mzamane's own career. Writing in *Momentum* some years later, he states that for a long time after his 'apprenticeship' as a writer, his commitment remained 'quite ambiguous' (1984b:301). He refers to the obvious risks run by any black writer who questioned the status quo, and continues: 'Despite what I now perceive as some valuable elements in my early work, I was always painfully aware of a groping, of something lacking in my work, the absence of an ideological framework...' (302). The stories in *Mzala* were collected in book form in 1980, but many had been published in one or other of the South African literary magazines some years previously. That is, they seem to have been written *before* the defining events of 1976.<sup>18</sup> In his introduction Mzamane says that he 'only writes when the spirit moves him' (viii), and these stories surely reflect the freedom he then felt to celebrate through his writing vitality and individuality wherever he encountered it in his community. These qualities are present only intermittently in his later work. In *Children of Soweto* (1982), the heroes are the young student activists whose actions help change the political landscape of the country, and his project is to record and pay homage to their achievement, often in thinly fictionalized form. *The Children of the Diaspora and Other Stories of Exile* (1996) traces the paths taken by this generation of activists in exile. There is a gain in terms of overt political commitment, but a loss in terms of vitality and variety. The Soweto uprising may have supplied the necessary ideological stiffening, but it is likely to be the stories in *Mzala* which will continue to engage, provoke or simply entertain readers in our post-apartheid dispensation.

Is there any way of resolving the issues which have been raised with regard to these stories? Mzamane often refers to the culture of his people as 'a culture of resistance' (see, for example, his interview in *Staffrider* 6.1 [1984]), but in his more recent criticism he also points out that there are 'regressive' as well as 'progressive' strains in the culture of what he calls 'the historically disadvantaged' (1992:3). Paradoxically, the vitality which is celebrated in the stories and which is a feature of their style seems to be linked to both 'progressive' and 'regressive' strains in township culture, and it is this which complicates the contemporary reader's response to the stories. Perhaps the early Mzamane overvalues sheer 'vitality' and 'zest for life' indispensable as these qualities no doubt are. This does not diminish the interest or relevance which the stories have for readers in a post-apartheid South Africa, where a self-reflexive and self-critical climate needs to be fostered, and over-simple assertions or judgements avoided. This is a point Mzamane himself makes in a recent interview, where he articulate a need to the post-apartheid era for 'people to begin to examine themselves anew, afresh.... That will involve looking as never before at things about which we, with a few

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<sup>18</sup> 'My Cousin and his Pick-Ups' W&S published in *Izwi* (2.10) as early as 1973. 'My Cousin and the Law' followed in *Izwi* (3.16) in 1974. 'The Soweto Bride' appeared in *Contrast* (9.4) in 1975, and 'The Silva Cup is Broken' in *New Classic* (1) in 1975. 'A Present for my Wife' was first published in *New Classic* (5) in 1978, and 'My Other Cousin. Sitha' appeared in *Staffrider* (1.3) in 1978, but it seems likely that they were also written earlier.

exceptions...conspired to bsilent' (1996a:80). One of the issues he lists is 'black men's violence against black women' (81). This article will, I hope, have demonstrated that his first collection of stories engages the reader in complex and sometimes uncomfortable ways, and provides a valuable stimulus to the kind of social and cultural criticism that is as vital now as it has ever been.

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## Alfred Kruger

### Out of Control

Don't you just hate  
the little brat  
when a knock on your door  
announces  
that your long-lost cousin  
whom you thought was dead  
arrives with his son? Oh,  
coals on your head!

Gap-toothed (with tomahawk), he  
strips your house--  
and ruins your lounge suite  
which only cost six thousand.  
His father  
demurely oblivious  
lets him out yearly  
on a wave of pillage and destruction.  
Don't whinge!  
There goes your fridge's hinge--  
And your vacuum cleaner's  
lost its suction.

'Give my regards,' you blearily say  
as red-eyed the next day  
they're on their way;  
for you know in your heart  
it will come to fruition  
that this kid's career will be in  
Demolition.

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